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KILLING IN THE SHADOWS,

AND OTHER SPECIAL OPERATIONS

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"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman…has to make is to establish …the kind of war…neither mistaking it for nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien." Clausewitz

SPECIAL OPERATIONS, A GROWTH INDUSTRY

The world changed after 9/11, and so did U.S. national security policy. Doubters from Berlin to Baghdad are now believers that the U.S. will not go back to business as usual, at least in the short run. President Bush declared a "war" on terrorism, but it is clear that he did not mean conventional warfare like anything we have sustained before. The call to arms for a "war on terrorism" is partly a bumper sticker for efforts cutting across all the national instruments of power to address a dire threat (and thus not strictly "war" at all.) In another sense, however, the administration is closely following Clausewitz' dictum that the first priority must be to understand the kind of war one is facing; it is one tailor made for Special Operations, not as a silver bullet, but as a major, increasingly important tool.

In his National Security Strategy (NSS), President Bush prescribed this kind of war: "the struggle against global terrorism is different from any other war in our history…Progress will come through the persistent accumulation of successes – some seen, some unseen." In a recent speech in St. Louis, Bush described our new approach: "By a combination of creative strategies and advanced technology, we are redefining war on our own terms."

He added, "In this new era of warfare, we can target a regime, not a nation." He cited the use of Special Forces (SF) in Iraq before full-fledged fighting began.[1]

Other administration actions and comments amplify the President's vision of a different kind of war and a stronger role for the Special Forces. Secretary of Defense Rumsfield has called for U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) to become a "supported command" in the war on terror, promising expanded resources and missions. He and other officials frequently cite SF success in Afghanistan as prime examples of both military transformation and the new, offensive-minded U.S. approach. The NSS and many administration pronouncements warn that we cannot defend all targets all the time against terrorism; the best defense is a good offense, and we will seek out and destroy terrorists and their supporters. One can argue with the administration's strategy or tactics, but, thus far, there is no reason to doubt its resolve. Special Operations are a growth industry worthy of a closer look.

TWO VIEWS, SIMILAR QUESTIONS AND THEMES

The author looked at two very different books for a window on the increasingly important use of Special Forces to defend American security. "Killing Pablo," by Mark Bowden (Atlantic Monthly, N.Y., 2001) is an in-depth look at one long operation aimed at the simple (but oh so tough) goal of hunting down one man, the notorious Colombian drug kingpin and mass murderer Pablo Escobar. This fascinating story, told by the author of "Black Hawk Down," is a kind of "micro" approach to SF, but addresses many key

[1] "Bush Urges U.N. to Lift Economic Sanctions on Iraq," The Washington Post, April 17, p A31.

questions facing policy makers, warriors, and citizens facing the new war on terrorism. How can/should the U.S. employ or partner with surrogate forces to achieve our aims? Whose ethics apply to these partnerships, theirs, ours, or "it depends?" How do law enforcement, intelligence, and military SF complement, or compete with, each other?

"Shadow Warriors," by Tom Clancy with Gen. Carl Stiner (ret.) and Tony Holtz (Berkley Books, N.Y., 2002) takes a broader, historical view, with analysis of Special Operations evolution as well as SF roles in conflicts from Vietnam to Desert Storm. This "wide angle" view asks some of the same questions as "Killing Pablo," but also examines SF in light of civil-military relations, conventional military-SF relations, leadership tenets, and the future of Special Operations. Suspenseful as a novel when exploring specific operations and acts of heroism, the book also explains training in great detail, and provides an excellent window on at least a few SF leaders and their (not always easy) relations with conventional commanders. As the Bush administration orders more and more from the SF "menu," Clancy's review is especially useful.

THE MICRO VIEW: SPECIAL FORCES, AND "FRIENDS" ON THE HUNT

Mark Bowden's effort here, as in "Black Hawk Down," is full of insights, but is more story-telling than argumentation. The ex-DEA Country Director in Colombia mouths the main thesis, retiring with hope the lesson learned from the efforts to get Pablo Escobar isn't "the ends justify the means." This lament comes after it is clear that the Government of Colombia's (GOC) special unit hunting Escobar at a minimum accepted

help from very unsavory characters, from Escobar's drug-dealing competitors to paramilitary leaders. U.S. training and intelligence targeted at one "bad guy" were thus arguably helpful to groups which remain to this day threats to U.S. interests. In addition, as the hunt progressed, it became ever clearer that the real goal of the GOC and its "helpers" was not to capture and prosecute Pablo (efforts that had failed miserably), but to kill him. Bowden argues that many Americans involved knew and accepted this, crossing an uncomfortable line.

Bowden's more interesting points, however, address the broader costs, benefits, obstacles, and advantages of the use of Special Forces, however, rather than the merits of this one (sustained) mission. He notes the importance of knowing one's target, for example, with both U.S. and Colombian forces successfully studying Escobar in great detail. Absorbing his ruthlessness (a slow and bloody lesson) was the key to deciding that all-out efforts were needed to stop him. Understanding his exceptional devotion to his nuclear family (despite his taste for teenage prostitutes), was the key to catching him.

This case illustrates clearly how political conditions set parameters for the use of SF, and how changing circumstances can limit or liberate U.S. policymakers. In Pablo's case, for example, his murder of a Minister of Justice in 1983 caused both the GOC and the USG to begin to consider him a potential military target, who threatened the state, rather than just the rule of law. Narcotics cooperation with leftist guerrillas (FARC), a famous photo of traffickers in Managua's airport with Sandinistas, and guerrilla (M-19) destruction of

traffickers' criminal records in an attack on Colombia's Supreme Court strengthened the notion of Escobar as more than just a criminal.

The U.S. also began to call drugs a national security threat (NSDD 221, April 1986), leading to an unprecedented mixing of law enforcement and military threats. The rules had changed (as they have again after 9/11), and the U.S. and Colombia thus agreed to dramatically increase anti-narcotics cooperation, including training and intelligence; Escobar was the poster child for these increased efforts. Bowden details how a U.S. Army "operational intelligence unit" filled a gap between ongoing CIA and NSA support to a special Colombian group called "Search Bloc." Code-named "Centra Spike," the new U.S. unit had money and enthusiasm and began to use the latest technology to track Escobar.

Initially, the unit's job was restricted to finding Escobar and alerting Colombians to go and get him. Eventually, however, Escobar turned himself in, stayed briefly in a prison of his own luxurious construction, and then escaped. Colombia appeared a laughing stock, and President Gaviria was convinced stronger help was needed. The GOC and the U.S. Ambassador decided Delta Force commandos were needed or the GOC would never be able to actually seize Pablo. Aware of JCS reluctance to involve the U.S. military in the hunt for a fugitive, the U.S. Ambassador to Colombia was surprised when Chairman Colin Powell approved his request for Delta Force help, but only so long as they restricted themselves to training, vice operations. Political conditions in both Colombia

and the U.S. had changed to the point that previously impossible deployment risks were now possible. Today's war on terrorism involves even more fluid conditions, where the risks of inaction now overcome previously insurmountable obstacles to offensive operations, such as killing terrorists with a missile from a UAV in Yemen.

Bowden points to hard competition among CIA, DEA, NSA, and DOD to get Pablo, or help the GOC do it. He argues that improvements to Colombian forces through U.S. SF training were key, noting that organizing foreigners to fight was a "founding doctrine of Special Operations Forces." The help of a criminal band calling itself "Los Pepes" ("those persecuted by Pablo Escobar") was equally important, however. This group, including drug competitors and other criminals, viciously killed Escobar's family and accomplices (without U.S. training), leaving Pablo increasingly isolated and desperate. As this became widely known, it also left U.S. officials feeling soiled, with the U.S. Ambassador claiming that, had he known earlier of cooperation between Los Pepes and Colombian authorities, it would have been a "show stopper" for U.S. assistance. The most compelling story here is how SF must be ready to support rapidly changing political goals, in concert with various U.S. and foreign agencies, in the face of high political and physical risks, and with a variety of methods.

A WIDE ANGLE APPROACH: THERE'S MORE SF TO COME

Tom Clancy and Gen. Carl Stiner (ret.) review SF history, training, and major operations from Vietnam to Desert storm, noting many points raised by Bowden, but treating them

with more depth and context. Like Colin Gray, these authors emphasize the "SPECIAL" in Special Forces and take pains to argue they've been underestimated, under-appreciated, and under-utilized. Stiner's autobiographical touches add realism and make useful connections between historical examples and current events. Although written before operation Enduring Freedom, the book seems remarkably relevant even as we conclude Operation Iraqi Freedom.

U.S. response to the Achile Lauro episode, including the force down of an unarmed foreign plane carrying terrorists, reminds us that the U.S. did not just discover bold action after 9/11. It also reminds us, however, that allies cannot always be counted on; the Italians let the terrorist ring leader escape (although later convicting him in absentia), but his recent detention in Baghdad reminds that long memories are necessary in fighting terrorism.

Clancy and Stiner stress that agility is an SF loadstone; when time is a precious asset (as in fighting ever-more destructive terrorists today), SF are a great investment. Stiner's experiences and analysis of operations from Panama to Iraq stress the incredible payoff from the extraordinary training of Special Forces. This book relates the high stakes of Special Operations, noting national humiliation resulted from the failed hostage rescue attempt in Iran. The authors frequently note the military's traditional distrust of "elites," arguing that misinformed senior leaders, to include Gen. Schwarzkopf, fail to take advantage of SF capabilities, to the nation's detriment. Echoing arguments made on

broader "transformation" issues today, Stiner claims the Army resists change in general, sometimes needing two or three generations to accept reform. At the same time, the authors carefully avoid portraying SF as a "silver bullet" to solve all problems.

Clancy and Stiner stress the need for good intelligence and "jointness" or at a minimum coordination among Special Forces and between them and conventional troops. They note that USSOCOM was created at the same time as broader Department of Defense reforms under the Goldwater-Nichols legislation. Their account notes that SF roles are only one of the controversies that continue since these reforms. Their description of planning for the invasion of Panama reminds one of some headlines about "Iraqi Freedom." Some favored a slow buildup of overwhelming force in Panama, while others favored speed and shock. Stiner argues that the Army and other service chiefs distrusted the complexity of the plan for "Just Cause," although eventually approving it.

Stiner argues SF impact on Desert Storm was blunted by a "bad command approach." Failure to allow an SF General at CENTCOM left a gaping hole in decision-making. As SCUD killing got off more slowly than desired, with Israel threatening to enter the war, SF proposals to go after the SCUDs were rejected. According to Stiner, Colin Powell and SecDef Cheney had to overrule CINC Schwarzkopf to allow SF operations. The authors note that the same things that make SF valuable (and special) - speed, flexibility, technology, adaptability, risk, response to political as well as military factors – trouble some conventional leaders. These same attributes, however, will make SF a growth

industry, useful in crisis management, stability operations, and smaller offensive operations. Their prescription strikes me as only strengthened by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

CONCLUSIONS: SPECIAL FORCES, AND OTHER, LESSONS

Our enemies have ensured that more fighting awaits us, even if not on the scale of theater war. The threats dictate and our President has declared that defense is not enough. Blending all instruments of power to fight terrorism, sometimes preemptively, clearly will require more from what we have called Special Operations, and what we may come to call them in the future. Both of these books raise enduring perspectives on the continuing fight, and convinced the author of the key role of Special Forces. The following are not exclusively SF themes, and some are almost clichés. The national security world really is new since 9/11, though, and we must challenge our leaders and ourselves to look at things anew, and be ready to respond quickly, adroitly, and flexibly, sometimes in that very special way.

- Know your enemy in general, and specific targets in particular. Think like a terrorist, invest in intelligence, and avoid mirror-imaging.
- We need allies in most fights, whether drugs or terror are the enemy, but consensus must support our objectives, not lead them.

- New wars mean new rules of engagement, blending of law enforcement and combat, and extraordinary risks. Offense, or forward defense, vs. terrorism is bloody and messy; we need political will and support for the warfighters. Mistakes of omission (letting Taliban's Omar escape) can be worse than those of commission.
- Technology no silver bullet, but it matters. Get it quick, use it imaginatively, promote initiative. Speed vs. weight a real question, not just a bumper sticker. Reexamine paths to lethality.
- Leadership matters more. Risk takers, team players, folks who know the rules have changed should be in charge.
- SF symbolize all kinds of changes/reforms resisted by many. Test is effectiveness facing new threats. Get over old loyalties.
- Unsavory allies or cobelligerents may be necessary, even when evil.
- War is always political, and the war on terror excruciatingly so. The combination of actual war, smaller scale use of force, open threats of military action, more veiled threats, use of other means of pressure, and changing alliances make the war on terror extremely complex. Clear doctrines just aren't available (there is no Iraq, N. Korea, Iran template, despite what critics say.) Clear enemies, fixed end-states, enhanced burden-sharing, logical buildups, comfortable resource levels, etc. are valuable goals, but can't be showstoppers. Whether Special Forces, infantry, or diplomats, we all need to be ready for new circumstances, or the nation will pay.